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“So long as there’s hair there still”: Displaying lack of interest as a practice for negotiating social norms of appearance for older women

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Abstract

Although women's appearance is theorised as being central to their identity and social currency, much prior research has argued that as women age, other aspects of their lives assume a higher priority than their appearance.

Nevertheless, they continue to invest time in appearance practices. In undertaking these various appearance practices, older women have to negotiate a range of conflicting social norms of age-appropriate appearance, such as managing the balancing act between 'letting themselves go' on the one hand and looking 'mutton dressed as lamb' on the other.

This paper contributes to the growing literature on older women's attitudes to their appearance and related practices. Drawing on data from a two-year research project in a hair-salon catering primarily for older clients, I examine the question of the importance to women of their appearance through the lens of their hair-care practices. Focussing on a group of nine female clients aged 55-90 in a small hair-salon in southern England, I show how participants in their talk and embodied presentation display shifting orientations of investment/interest (or lack of interest) in their appearance. Comparing participants' appearance *practices*, with their *talk* in two sequential environments in which a possible interest in appearance is made particularly

salient, I argue that these shifting orientations reveal participants' subtle negotiation of competing social norms of appearance for older women.

Keywords: older women, appearance, hair-salon, interaction, conversation analysis, ethnography, interview

Introduction

Mrs Elder, a participant in my research in a hair-salon, Ellie's Style Shop, launched my interview with her with a striking expression of dissatisfaction with her ageing appearance. I had just explained to her that the interview would centre on: "themes to do with appearance um and thinking of going to Ellie's but also (.) getting older ((*Mrs Elder laughs*)) thinking about that", when Mrs Elder cut in as follows:

Extract 1 (simplified transcript; all *participants'* names are pseudonyms; see below for discussion of use of my own name here and elsewhere)

Mrs Elder: oh right (.) I think it's awful

Rachel: getting older

Mrs Elder: yeah ((*laughs*))

Rachel: go on

Mrs Elder: oh yeh I think it's dreadful (Rachel: why?) well (.) I think it's the appearance (Rachel: right) you know I think everything else is all right (.) except the odd twinges of course (Rachel: yes) but I mean we don't let anything hold us back and we have you know good good times it's just you look in the mirror and you think ooh God ((*laughs*))

Mrs Elder's response, in which she names appearance as the 'awful' and 'dreadful' thing about getting older, resonates with prior research highlighting older women's increasing dissatisfaction with aspects of their ageing appearance (e.g., Furman 1997, Hurd Clarke, Griffin and Pacc Res Team 2008, Montemurro and Gillen 2012). Twigg (2007: 285) comments on the centrality of the body in experiences of ageing; and in a society in which 'the ideal female body is healthy, thin, toned, shapely, wrinkle free, and young' (Hurd Clarke *et al.* 2008: 1085), the ageing body may be particularly problematic for *women*. Women's appearance is theorised as being central to their 'social currency and the successful doing of femininity' (Hurd Clarke 2011: 31); it is seen as the locus of their *female* identity (Coupland 2003, Hurd 2000). For many women, therefore, the appearance-related changes they experience as they grow older are one of the most distressing aspects of ageing.

This problematic relationship with their bodies and appearance is potentially exacerbated by today's consumerist society that offers a picture of a malleable body, an 'identity project' that can be made and remade (Biggs 1999, Coupland 2009: 956); and where media images urge women to 'dump a decade' (Coupland 2009: 962). Susan Sontag (1983[1972]) argued that women faced a 'double standard of ageing' compared to men, claiming that they were judged more negatively since they were evaluated for appearance, linked to youth,

whereas men's worth rested on performance. In this vein, Calasanti claimed that 'grey hair or wrinkles will mark women as "old" well before they do for men' (2007: 351), with all the negative connotations associated with the term 'old'. Older people generally risk being treated as of no account and become invisible (Bytheway *et al.* 2007: 31). For older women, this can be particularly the case, leading Symonds and Hollands to comment that 'grey hair on a woman... produce[s] one of the least desirable personas in Western society – an old woman.' (2008: 29). Managing appearance – and the site and practices of doing so – takes on added significance for older women seeking to accommodate the tensions between their changing (ageing) appearance and their sense of who they are, now, and what it is to be 'feminine', as e.g., Furman (1997) and Weitz (2005) show. This paper contributes to the growing literature on older women's attitudes to their appearance and related practices. Drawing on data from my doctoral research in a hair-salon catering primarily for older clients, I examine the question of the importance to women of their appearance through the lens of their hair-care practices. Focussing on a group of nine female clients, I show how participants in their talk and embodied presentation display shifting orientations of investment/interest (or lack of interest) in their appearance. Comparing participants' appearance *practices*, with their *talk* in two sequential environments in which a possible interest in appearance is made particularly

salient, I argue that these shifting orientations reveal participants' low-key negotiation of conflicting social norms of appearance for older women.

Hair, ageing and dilemmas of self-presentation

Over the last twenty-five years there has been a burgeoning interest in older women's (dis)satisfaction with their bodies and, relatedly, exploration into the importance to, and meaning for, older women of their appearance (Hurd Clarke and Korotchenko 2011). This research generally shows that aspects of appearance, especially weight, continue to be important for older women (for example, Hurd Clarke *et al.* 2008, Hurd 2000, Montemurro and Gillen 2012). However, different priorities emerge, with factors such as health assuming a greater importance (Jankowski *et al.* 2014, Liechty 2012, Tiggemann 2004). Different cultural (Kinnunen 2010), social class (Dumas, Laberge and Straka 2005, Tunaley, Walsh and Nicolson 1999) and ethnic locations (Reboussin *et al.* 2000, Wray 2007) also potentially shape older women's expressed beliefs, as does the impact of participants' earlier careers and changing social norms of bodily appearance (Dumas *et al.* 2005). Some of this research highlights the multifarious meanings of appearance and appearance work. For example, Liechty's (2012) nuanced account shows how for most of her participants their appearance remained *important* to them, but their *satisfaction* with their body

image depended on the meanings appearance had for them. Thus for some, a focus on a managed approach to 'looking good' rather than on (unachievable) youthful beauty was the key, a finding that emerged, too, in Paulson and Willig's (2008) study.

In undertaking their various appearance practices older women face a number of challenges. Prime among these is managing to 'grow old gracefully' – striking the balance between doing too little or too much for their appearance (Furman 1997: 116, Hurd Clarke, Griffin and Maliha 2009, Jankowski *et al.* 2014, Ward and Holland 2011). Women who do too little, particularly if they have the means at their disposal to take action, may at best meet with disapprobation for having 'let themselves go' (Brooks 2010, Coupland 2009), or at worst, find they are treated as invisible (Bytheway *et al.* 2007: 31). Yet women who seem to devote undue time and effort on their looks or try to look *too* young may be castigated as vain or ridiculed as 'mutton dressed as lamb' (Furman 1997, Hurd Clarke 2002). As Ward and Holland observe, 'Older women in particular appear caught in a dilemma over their appearance: on the one hand considered ridiculous or grotesque; and on the other, simply discounted and unseen' (2011: 301).

One quotidian way in which women may seek to accommodate or resist local cultural ideals about female appearance (Weitz 2001: 669), including

appearance appropriate to older women (Ward and Holland 2011: 289), is through their hair. Hair is one of the key means whereby people display who they are or want to be (Gimlin 1996, Synnott 1987, Weitz 2005). However, it also presents particular challenges for women as they get older, with greying, thinning hair being one of the most obvious signs of both their departing youth and their diminished 'feminine identity' (Ward and Holland 2011: 290, Weitz 2005: 200). Given the malleability of hair, it is also a key means of hiding or otherwise managing that sign of ageing. Nevertheless, despite the growing interest in older women's appearance practices and their importance, and despite the malleability of hair in managing the look of older age, little research examines older women's hair and other appearance practices and attitudes to these in a *hair-salon*.

Among studies that *do* adopt such a perspective are Furman's (1997) nuanced and sensitive ethnography with a group of older women in a North American hair-salon. Furman highlights the way society presents older women's bodies as uncontrollable and no longer feminine, with some of her participants (aged 55 to 86) orientating to a view that being attractive was no longer the concern of older women. More recently, papers emerging from the Research on Ageing Discrimination project (Bytheway *et al.* 2007) have pointed to the role of the hair-salon as a potential site not only of friendship but also of the re-inscribing of

social norms of age-appropriate appearance on the female clients (Symonds and Holland 2008, Ward and Holland 2011). A further body of research explores the management and meaning of hair-care for people with dementia in care settings (Ward and Campbell 2013, Ward, Campbell and Keady 2014, Ward, Campbell and Keady 2016). This highlights the centrality of appearance practices to their sense of self for people living with dementia and the well-being that stems from engagement in hair work.

In what follows, I start by detailing the methodology of my research. I then show how participants displayed themselves as more or less invested in their appearance in their appearance *practices*. I compare these displays of *interest* with discursive displays of *lack of interest* in two different interactional contexts: talk to approve the stylist's work and talk in research interviews. I argue that these apparently inconsistent orientations towards their appearance can be partly understood as low-key and very subtle work to negotiate competing norms of appearance management for older women.

Research methods

The data for this paper are drawn from my doctoral research into older women's identity constructions through their talk and practices in a hair-salon. This study

was informed by interactional sociolinguistics (IS), which, explains Rampton (2006: 24), regards interaction as central in the construction and reproduction of identities, without overlooking participants' location in 'larger/longer/slower social processes'. Erickson argues that foregrounding detailed micro-analysis of actual instances of interaction 'helps us understand how social change can take place — within processes of social reproduction — particularly as change happens within processes of local interaction that are accomplished intuitively.' (2014 (2001): 153). So although social norms and processes may seem to be all shaping and pervasive, individuals can reproduce, contest and subvert particular social norms unconsciously and in the smallest moves in interaction, and in so doing, construct themselves as particular kinds of people. These small interactional moves are what Erickson calls 'a kind of 'wiggle room' within which hegemonic reproduction can be partially interrupted, or slid around.' (*ibid*, p.169). Central to an IS methodology is the collection of as rich a dataset as possible of audio-/video-recordings of situated interactions – generally face-to-face – combined with participant observation and retrospective commentary to support an understanding of particular settings and their practices. Detailed analysis of the interactional data using micro-discourse analysis (informed in this study by Conversation Analysis) helps us identify those small moments of 'wiggle room' of which Erickson speaks.

Site and participants

The setting of this study, Ellie's Style Shop, is a small independent hair-salon, located in a village in southern England and run by the owner, Ellie, with two members of staff, Bethan and Clare. It comprises one downstairs room with five styling stations, three wash-basins at the back of the shop, and four old-fashioned hood-dryers arrayed along one wall. A small room upstairs is used for the drying of towels and gowns, and as a staff rest-room. The community served by Ellie's is older and less racially mixed than is the case for England as a whole, and these characteristics are reflected in the salon's clientele, who are mostly older folk, and overwhelmingly white British.

In contrast to the overtly feminized spaces described in some studies of hair-salons (e.g., Barber 2008: 461), Ellie's presents a quite neutral space, with walls painted off-white, brown flooring and overhead lighting that casts a somewhat unflattering light. The magazines on offer, though overtly targeting a female readership (e.g., *Women's Own*, *Good Housekeeping*), do not focus exclusively on health and beauty; and although the shelves are stacked with hair products for sale, there are no other stereotypically feminine items. Like Julie's International Salon in Furman's study, the accent at Ellie's is 'on functionality, not glamour' (Furman 1997: 18). This emphasis on functionality

might in part be a function of the salon's clientele, with Ellie claiming that men comprise some 40% of her client list.

My nine client participants were all white British women, ranging in age from 55-90. My three oldest participants attended Ellie's weekly for a shampoo-and-set; the remaining six all had a cut and blow dry, and each of these women coloured their hair, either at home or in the hair-salon. I recruited these nine participants in various ways. Some approached me, having seen a small poster I put up in the salon; some, I approached, having built up rapport during my time observing (see below); some were prompted by Ellie.

Data collection

The data collection encompassed audio-recording of naturally-occurring interactions supplemented by participant observation and interviews.ⁱⁱ

To build a rich collection of interactional data I recorded a total 27 hair-appointments (c.20 hours of audio-recordings) of my nine client participants. For each of these, the digital recorder lay above the wash-basin or on the shelf in front of them at the styling station.

To gain an understanding of the salon's people and practices – and to help in recruiting my participants – I undertook nearly two years of participant observation in Ellie's as both client and quasi salon-worker. Hand-written 'scratch-notes' of my observations were typed up fully each evening, and coded using NVivo to support the identification of patterns of practices.

Interviews, which lasted up to three hours and were audio-recorded, were held in either participants' homes or a local café. Each of these took place after I had observed three or more of the participant's hair-appointments and audio-recorded between two and four of them. The interviews supplemented the analysis of the naturally-occurring interactional data and encompassed topics relevant to the wider study. The part of the interview schedule focussing on appearance included prompts to encourage participants to relate their experiences of hairdressers and hair management and their reflections on their appearance and ageing, whilst also allowing exploration of issues emerging from observation and initial analysis of appointment recordings.

Data analysis

The starting-point of the analysis was the building of collections. In terms of the audio-recorded data, these collections encompassed both interactional

phenomena (for example, kinds of sequence, like consultation and approval sequences), and more topic-orientated collections (for example, talk about hair-colour and colouring in hair-salon interactions or interview). From the fieldnotes were derived, for example, collections of descriptions of clients' attire and notes on their appointment-making practices as well as broader descriptions of the processes and practices of the salon.

At this point I made very detailed transcripts of all the audio-recorded data in each collection, using the Conversation Analytic (CA) notation system devised by Jefferson (2004),ⁱⁱⁱ and subjecting them to micro-linguistic analysis drawing on CA's analytic tools. CA focusses on understanding people's ordinary, everyday sense-making methods in interaction. Its primary analytic goals are to understand and describe 'the intertwined construction of practices, actions, activities, and the overall structure of interactions' (Stivers and Sidnell 2013: 2), drawing on a sophisticated apparatus that supports detailed scrutiny of a range of aspects of interaction, such as turn-taking, turn-design and the ways sequences unfold (Schegloff 2007, chapters in Sidnell and Stivers 2013).

Interview analysis

Much qualitative research examining appearance and its importance to older women has used unstructured interviews as a research method. Despite the undoubted nuance that can emerge from these, the socially-situated nature of the research encounter is too often overlooked. For example, studies often comment that the researcher's positionality will have shaped the way participants respond or that particular kinds of response may be attentive to social norms (e.g., Liechty 2012). However, studies rarely – if ever – show *how* that shaping evidences itself in participants' responses. More importantly, the way the interviewer her/himself shapes responses through the presuppositions embedded in her/his questions is not considered; indeed, all too often the interviewer's questions are simply omitted. Studies in the conversation analytic tradition, by contrast, have shown how interviews should be treated as social interactions in which the researcher plays a key shaping role (Wooffitt and Widdicombe 2006).

With these points in mind, for the purpose of analysis I both incorporated my own utterances into the transcript and included them in the analysis alongside those of my participants to examine how my questions sequentially-shaped participants' responses. Following Rampton (2006), among others who adopt

an interactional approach, I refer to myself by name to underline my status as co-participant in the interaction.

In the next section I consider the insights offered by observation of participants' practices in the salon. I start with these as they were chronologically the first data I collected and were thus influential, along with the initial review of the appointment-recordings, in shaping the assumptions I brought to the interviews, as I discuss further below.

Practices of attire and appointment-making

During my two years of fieldwork I observed some 500 appointments of nearly 200 women and my fieldnotes became full of brief descriptions of how Ellie's clients, including my nine participants, were dressed. Most clients tended towards a smart or even elegant style: carefully made-up, hair neatly brushed, nails clean and sometimes polished, clothes coordinated for style and colour, and the look finished off with ear-rings, necklaces, broches and bracelets. The following extracts from my fieldnotes give a flavour of these modes of self-presentation:

Extract 2

She was wearing pale pink nail varnish and light make up – light foundation and a little lipstick. Gold-coloured jewellery. She wore flat black stylish shoes

and trousers with co-ordinated top. Her light hair was cut quite short and curled neatly over her ears. (Rose, seventies)

Extract 3

She was elegantly attired – a thin white cotton cardigan above a long silky black, white and turquoise flower-patterned skirt. She wore a turquoise drop pendant around her neck, and was made up with light foundation and pink lipstick that enhanced the bright blue of her eyes. (Mrs Finch, nineties)

Just a few clients – and just one of my participants, Brenda – sometimes turned up to their appointment looking less carefully put together:

Extract 4

She was wearing somewhat baggy clothes - jersey and trousers. Her nails were not short, but not painted, and with a hint of deep-ingrained grime. As she said, "archaeologist's nails". She wore no make-up and no jewellery. Her hair, shoulder length and wavy, was rather windswept and straggly-looking. (Brenda, sixties)

As these notes indicate, there was considerable variety in clients' apparel and self-presentation. However, analysis of these descriptions revealed certain commonalities in the dress choices of Ellie's clients. These commonalities related mainly to *style*. So it was rare to see older women in Ellie's wearing high-heeled shoes; and loose clothing seemed to be preferred to figure-hugging, short and figure-revealing clothes (in line with the norms identified by Hurd Clarke *et al.* (2009)). Of course, participants doubtless have multiple

reasons for these choices. For example, they may partly be seeking *comfort* in looser apparel and lower heels, much as was claimed by participants in the research by Hurd Clarke *et al.* (2009: 716ff). For many of them – and interview data points this way – their current investment in how they look may also partly reflect both habit and a desire to maintain some continuity with their former on-sight identity (Symonds and Holland 2008: 33f, Ward and Campbell 2013: 344).

But occasional comments made by various clients in general and my participants in particular suggest that among the factors shaping clients' appearance choices was a desire to dress age-appropriately; and what is appropriate *now* is cast as different to *past* practice, as in the following fieldnote of a conversation with a client in her late sixties just before her appointment:

Extract 5

"When I was back in the sixties," reflected the client, "I used to wear mini-skirts and things but I wouldn't now." She commented how disapproving she felt if she saw a woman ahead of her in her fifties or sixties but dressing like a teenager or twenty-year-old. It didn't matter how trim they look, she added.

Here the client implicitly associates a kind of figure-revealing and trendy attire with youth. Dressing age-appropriately for older women – here defined as fifties or sixties – involves on the contrary not revealing too much flesh or trying to be trendy. Similar observations about age-appropriate dress and appearance were

made by most participants both during their audio-recorded hair-appointments and in interview. So they talked about what the *recipient* should do or what *they* had done to age well (as far as looks were concerned); and they problematized aspects of social norms of age-appropriate appearance for older women in general and themselves in particular, criticising women deemed to be dressing too young (for example, wearing pedal pushers in their sixties or seventies), and worrying whether they themselves looked like ‘mutton dressed as lamb’.

As a minimum, these claims display participants’ *awareness* of social norms of appearance for older women, including the need to adapt one’s attire with age. And their *practices* of attire suggest that they are in fact tacitly orientating to these loose and unspecific social norms of age-appropriate appearance for older women, avoiding looking like ‘mutton dressed as lamb’ whilst managing not to ‘let themselves go’. More particularly, in generally looking as if they had invested care in their appearance, these older women also displayed themselves as to that extent *interested* in how they looked; that is, they looked as if their appearance had some importance for them.

This display of investment in their appearance was mirrored in the regular patterns of appointment-making and attendance practices adopted by most of my participants. So my three oldest participants, who still had a shampoo-and-

set, attended Ellie's on the same day each week, only booking their appointment when some event disturbed their routine. Of my other six client participants, all of whom had a cut and blow dry, five likewise had a regular pattern of attendance at Ellie's, ranging from every four to eight weeks. These clients generally booked their next appointment at the close of the current. Just a few clients, of whom Brenda was one, had much looser patterns of attendance and appointment-making, allowing months to elapse between appointments before ringing to book last-minute.

Furthermore, in the course of my fieldwork I observed several clients, including my participants, from time-to-time altering the pattern of their hair appointments, for example inserting an extra visit, to look their best for particular events – family lunches, coach trips, visits to London, weddings, and so on. Indeed, the mention by a client of having booked an additional appointment sometimes prompted Ellie to enquire about a possible outing. This points to a conventionalised association between a break in clients' usual appointment patterns and an upcoming social event, and an orientation by all parties to the importance of looking (particularly) good for special events. That is to say, their appearance assumes a particular importance at such times.

In short, in the relative tightness or looseness of their hair-appointment making and attending practices, in the care they devoted to their attire and other aspects of their appearance, particularly when going out or for social events, participants displayed themselves as more or less invested in their appearance. And unlike the views expressed by participants in the research by Tunaley *et al.* (1999) with respect to their weight, my participants tended *not* to treat their *age* as an excuse or a reason to 'let themselves go', to be lax in matters of appearance when it came to their hair, attire and grooming, or to be more *laissez-faire* when faced with social events. Indeed, even Brenda – the participant who often turned up rather scruffily attired – was eventually driven by her three inches of grey roots to have her hair coloured. Thus in line with the research discussed earlier, examination of my participants' practices shows them continuing to invest time and effort in their appearance, and, I suggest, in attending to broad social norms of appearance for older women.

Of course, the nature of my research site and selection of participants means that the latter have inevitably displayed at least some interest in their appearance simply by virtue of their attending the hair-salon. Clearly many older women may never have attended or no longer attend a hair-salon, for whatever reason; their displays of (un)interest via their hair and other appearance practices are omitted in my study. Nevertheless, given the fact that my

participants *do* on the whole display investment in their appearance through their practices, it is particularly telling to compare this display with their appearance-related *talk*. In what follows I examine the way participants orientate discursively to their appearance in two interactional settings, the hair-salon itself and the research interview, focussing on two sequential environments in which appearance was made particularly salient, namely what I call the ‘approval sequence’, and sequences in interviews where which focussed on a possible investment in appearance. As I will show, in both sets of sequences participants tended to display *lack* of interest in their appearance, even if they had minutes earlier been displaying *interest*.

Discursive orientations to appearance

Setting 1: Hair-appointment

Participants engaged in relatively little appearance-related talk during their hair-appointments. Occasional lengthy consultations at the start; sometimes explanations of changes – additions or lapses – to their routine; rare longer exchanges about their changing appearance; brief comments or instructions interjected into other talk (‘monitoring talk’); and more or less expansive expressions of approval at the close: these comprised the sum of the discursive displays of interest by participants in their appearance.

The only sequence common to all the recorded hair-appointments was the last of these (indeed, even this was occasionally effected without talk). This, the ‘approval sequence’, occurs at the end of the treatment, and in Ellie’s is typically initiated by the stylist taking out a mirror to show the client the back of her head. It is the culmination of the overt purpose of the hair-appointment. Here, if nowhere else, we might expect to see some displays of interest by the client in what the stylist has done: scrutiny at least, and perhaps, too, expressions of pleasure and appreciation of her work (as reported in other studies of hair-salons, e.g. Weitz (2005: 182, 184)). Indeed, we *do* see such displays. However, many approval sequences in Ellie’s were very cursory, produced almost ‘in passing’, as in the following extract.

Prior to this, the client, Mrs Middleton, and Ellie have been exchanging stories that illustrate their reasons for preferring bitches to (male) dogs; here, they produce affiliative codas to those stories.

Extract 6

1. Mrs Middleton I’ve had them in the
2. [pa:st but
3. [((Ellie finishes spraying and
replaces the canister on the
trolley))
4. (1)
5. Ellie no
6. Mrs Middleton no= (.)

7. Ellie =no I'm a bit funny like that
 8. (2) ((*during this gap, Ellie takes out the hand-mirror and shows Mrs Middleton the back of her head*))
 9. Mrs Middleton but I don't think I could e- (.)
 10. °lovely°
 11. .h I don't think I could ever be
 12. without a dog
 13. Ellie no (.)
 14. [no I don't think I would no:w
 15. [((*Ellie replaces mirror*))

Ellie takes out the mirror during the gap in l.8, but Mrs Middleton does not close off the story-telling and move to hair-business. Instead, she prolongs the story-telling, moving to a different impact of her tale (l.9). She then breaks off what she was saying and produces a single-word assessment (l.10), whose *sotto voce* design, rendering it literally less hearable, casts it as secondary to her story-telling. She then recycles in l.11 both the lexis and prosody of her utterance of l.9, thereby further marking the assessment of l.10 as side-business. Ellie collaborates in this orientation to story-telling: instead of acknowledging Mrs Middleton's 'lovely', she produces in l.14 a near-echo of Mrs Middleton's utterance.

One-third of the 26 recorded approval sequences are delivered 'in passing' in this manner. By delivering her approval in this way the client – with the stylist's collaboration – constructs *story-telling* as the main activity underway; and as more important *right now* than the hair-business which is the ostensible point of

the visit but here done very much in passing (or at least primarily assigned to the non-verbal domain).

This minimisation of an interest in appearance at the point when it most obviously becomes the focus is even clearer on the occasions when an overt display of lack of interest is made, as in the following extract, where Ellie is finishing off Brenda's hair.

Extract 7

1. Brenda yeh I don't do sitting [very [well
2. Ellie [((*mirror out*))
3. Ellie [no
4. Brenda it hurts my [back
5. Ellie [I know
6. Clare °join the [(club)°
7. Brenda [yeh well
8. Clare he he
9. Ellie [((*mirror back*))
10. Ellie [he he £she didn't really want to see the
11. back at [↑all£ he he he he he
12. Brenda [no (.)
13. so long as there's hair there still
14. there it's all right (.) isn't it

Ellie takes out the mirror in l.2 and replaces it in l.9. Between these actions, though, there is no verbal approval, as the comments about back-ache are continued. We can also infer from Ellie's utterance in l.10-11 that Brenda gave her reflection in the mirror little if any scrutiny. Ellie's laughter and use of the third person, casting Brenda as a non-addressed participant, points to

something unusual – worthy of comment – in Brenda’s action, namely the (almost) *complete* lack of interest in the back of her head (and by extension, in anything the stylist has done). Although Ellie’s observation is ostensibly addressed to Clare, it is *Brenda* who in l.12 responds; and she not only provides the preferred response, i.e., agreement, but effectively produces an exaggeratedly upgraded agreement (Pomerantz 1984: 65ff). This – ‘so long as there’s hair there still’ (l.13) – has the effect of not only agreeing, but also sets the bar for satisfaction so low as to constitute a strong display of lack of interest in her appearance.

We might argue that the reason for the minimal or (in Brenda’s case) non-existent approvals relates to the routine nature of the hair-appointment for these women. Yet the displayed lack of interest at this point contrasts with earlier scrutiny by both women of what the stylist was doing. That is, with displays of *interest*. So for example, some minutes before Mrs Middleton’s approval of Extract 6, the following had occurred.

Here Mrs Middleton has been telling Ellie an amusing story of an exchange with a friend, which forms part of a much longer complaint about the smell of silage. Mrs Middleton had just recounted how, when driving her friend and catching a particularly strong whiff of the silage, the friend had protested that ‘it wasn’t her’.

Extract 8

1. Ellie he he [he he he
 2. Mrs Middleton [I said (.)
 3. Ellie [he he he he he he he he he
 4. Mrs Middleton [↑well I didn't think it ↑wa:s he
 5. Ellie he he he
 6. Mrs Middleton he he he he
 7. he he
 8. .h £I said
 9. if that was [you I think
 10. Ellie [.h h...
 11. Mrs Middleton I ought£ to pu(h)ll o:ver
 12. he he [he he
 13. Ellie [ye(h)ah he
 14. £better chuck you ↑out£ he [he he
 15. he
 16. Mrs Middleton [ye(h)h
 17. he
 18. Ellie chu(h)ck you in a field he he [he
 19. Mrs Middleton [.h
 20. £ye:s£ s:ee them [bits
 21. Ellie [yeah
 22. Mrs Middleton they're all curling [out
 23. Ellie [they are
 24. (.)
 25. Ellie they're £going£
 26. Mrs Middleton good .h yeh it's so

From ll.1-18 Mrs Middleton and Ellie, with much hilarity, co-construct the somewhat risqué responses that the former might have made to her friend. In l.20, Mrs Middleton, still smiling, agrees with Ellie's imagined version of the exchange between Mrs Middleton and her friend. Then without a pause she shifts footing (Goffman 1981) – from laughing and intimate to serious; from story-telling with a friend to a client in the hair-salon – as she demonstrates in

ll.20 and 22 that she has all this while been closely attending to Ellie's work on her hair. In this shift of footing Mrs Middleton constructs her hair as, *at that point*, more important than the story she was telling and the longer complaint of which it was a part. As soon as Ellie provides reassurance (ll.23, 25), Mrs Middleton reverts to the longer complaint sequence with a 'so' that invites Ellie to draw her own conclusions about the story of the smell of silage (Raymond 2004).

In this 'monitoring talk' Mrs Middleton and others display a temporary orientation to the importance of their hair. Indeed, she and others display similar orientations at other times during their hair-appointments as briefly sketched at the start of this section. It's important to note, of course, that displays by participants of interest in their hair in a hair-salon can do other interactional work than simply (or even) showing interest in their appearance. For example, topicalizing their hair or mentioning an additional appointment can (also) provide an *entrée* to storytelling (e.g, about the event that necessitates the additional appointment). It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss such instances. The intriguing aspect, though, in the approval sequences, is that when explicitly invited via the taking out of the mirror to focus on their hair, Mrs Middleton, Brenda and others more or less overtly sometimes do discursive work that has the effect of *minimising* interest in their appearance. That is, any interest in their

appearance is played down by participants precisely at the point when it is made most salient, and regardless of prior displays of interest. A similar playing-down of interest in their appearance is evident, too, in interview when the possibility of their being invested in their appearance arises.

Setting 2: Research interview

In interview, all participants made a range of claims that we might be tempted to interpret as indicating the relative *lack of importance* to them of their appearance. For example, they asserted that they had other priorities for their time and money, that they were too busy for hair. Similarly, in talking of their daily appearance practices, participants made these out to be fast routines for minimum effort. Mrs Elder, for example, who had started the interview describing appearance as the awful thing about ageing (Extract 1), stated that she spent barely longer than ten minutes on her hair and make-up in the morning. Some participants also made explicit self-categorizations relating to what they were 'naturally' like – 'scruffy' or people who 'can't be bothered messing about'. However, close examination revealed a number of disfluencies accompanying many such claims in interview – pauses and hesitations, reformulations, and re-starts. Putting a micro-analytic lens on such interview talk is revealing, as I illustrate by discussing an extract from my interview with Rose.

I focus on Rose because her practices of attire (Extract 2) and tight hair-appointment routines for her cut and colouring suggested that her appearance was important to her. She was also one of the clients who produced rather more effusive approval sequences. Armed with this prior knowledge of Rose, I had expected her to assert that her appearance *was* important to her. In interview, though, she produced the kind of claims to *lack of* interest in her appearance discussed above. Furthermore, even the rare admissions indicating *some* interest in her appearance were down-played. However, these were also marked by signs of trouble, as in the following exchange that occurred just over half-an-hour into the interview.

Extract 9

1. Rachel what's it (.) >kinda like< (.)
2. what sort of importance does it have in
3. your life going to the: (.)
4. hair-salon (.) if any
5. (.)
6. Rose >sorry<
7. Rachel what kind of importance does it have
8. (2)
9. meaning for you does it have
10. going to the hair-salon
11. (.)
12. going to
13. (1)
14. Rachel [I mean not Ellie's specifically [but
15. Rose [er::: [no
16. Rachel but to the salon in general
17. (4)

18. Rose I think it's just ni:ce-
 19. (1)
 20. I don't ↑know really
 21. (...)
 22. um
 23. (4)
 24. think it's just the fact that you
 25. >you know<
 26. you've got someone do:ing
 27. (2)
 28. you know when you come out
 29. you're going to look
 30. (0.5)
 31. nice
 32. Rachel right
 33. Rose that's what I think it is
 34. (.)
 35. um th-the fact that you do get to (.)
 36. >you know< get someone to cha-
 37. and generally hairdressers are quite (.)
 38. good at
 39. (.)
 40. Rachel [mm
 41. Rose [having a chat (.) and (.)
 42. whatever aren't they
 43. I mean they that's what their job is a/
 44. >basically< apart from doing your hair
 45. they do tend to (.)
 46. keep you (.)
 47. chatting
 48. Rachel ya:[h
 49. Rose [>ah had a< male hairdresser [once
 50. Rachel [>oh
 51. right<
 52. Rose foo he was °go:rgeous°f=
 53. Rachel =.h.. he o(h)h wa(h)s he [he
 54. Rose [fI loved
 55. going theref (.) he [he
 56. Rachel [he ha ha
 57. ha [ha
 58. Rose [well (.)

inference' about her than to deny *knowledge* (Wooffitt 2005: loc1769). The 'meaning for her' (l.9) that she eventually produces – knowing 'you're going to look nice' (ll.28-31) – relates to her appearance. There is further distancing in Rose's design of this utterance, produced as it is with a distinct pause before 'nice' (l.30) and a 'generic you' which, along with 'you know' (l.25) both appeals to her interlocutor's own experience (O'Connor 2000: 99ff) and generalises the experience.

In response to Rose's elaboration, I produce an acknowledgement ('right', l.32), which appears to treat as self-evident an association between the *importance* to Rose of going to the hair-salon and wanting to *look 'nice'*. But this positions Rose as someone who is in fact interested in 'looking nice', that is, in her appearance.

It is at this point that Rose engages in discursive work to position herself rather differently. In l.33 she seems to be starting to confirm her prior response, marking it thus with her recycling in l.35 of 'the fact that you' from l.24. This time, though, the 'someone' referred to is someone to chat with rather than someone making her look nice. So barely has Rose mentioned 'looking nice' as the 'importance' or 'meaning' for her of going to the salon than she shifts the

focus onto a non-appearance-related ‘meaning for her’, namely ‘having a chat’ (I.41), with this element foregrounded as the stylist’s job (II.43-4).

Rose now launches a story. Sequentially occasioned, as it is, by the generalisation about the stylist’s job being ‘keeping you chatting’ (II.45-7) this story is constructed as an *example* of that aspect of the stylist’s job. Rose peoples her story with a stereotypical salon figure, the flattering male stylist (Robinson, Hall and Hockey 2011: 43), and herself, unashamedly ‘loving’ (I.54) the encounter with this ‘gorgeous’ (I.52) man whom she later describes as a ‘hunk’ (not shown). She thereby positions herself as more interested in the flirtatious encounter than in the work being done to her appearance.

This positioning of herself as a character in her tale is supported through her delivery. She uses emphasis and vowel elongation to infuse her evaluations of that stylist and the visits to his salon with an enthusiasm (II.52, 54-5) that is in stark contrast to the muted ‘just nice’ (I.18) and ‘quite good’ (II.37-8) of her initial and reworked responses. Moreover, smiles (I.52) and laughter (I.55) infiltrate her evaluations in a display of light-heartedness in which I collaborate (II.53, 56-7), and which further contrasts with the serious tone achieved in Rose’s initial responses. Through these *contrasts* with her initial and reworked responses of II.18-37, and through the *parallels* between her lively character in the story and

her liveliness in narrating it, Rose distances herself from her initial response. Instead, she points to her ‘real’ self as being someone who is primarily interested in the light-hearted chit-chat of the salon visit, with appearance-related concerns being secondary.

In summary, my question to Rose implicitly positions her as potentially interested in her appearance (*‘what importance does it have going to the hair-salon?’*). Her initial response aligns *semantically* with that implicit positioning (*‘you know when you come out you’re going to look nice’*). However, the signs of trouble in her *delivery* indicate that my implicit positioning of her, as someone interested to an extent in her appearance, is unwelcome to her. With her reworked response and story, she succeeds in re-positioning herself as a woman for whom the *appearance-aspect* of the salon visit is relatively *unimportant*.

Overall, detailed CA-informed analysis of the interviews showed that when I as interviewer embedded a presumption in my questions that participants were in fact *interested* in their appearance – implying, for example, that they spent ‘a lot’ of time on their hair, or, as with Rose here, that the visit to the hair-salon might be ‘important’ – signs of trouble tended to occur in their responses as they displayed themselves as *not* interested. Comparing Rose’s data with another

client's, Brenda's, is instructive. As mentioned above, Brenda was the participant who in her attire and routines (or lack thereof) most displayed herself as uninterested in her appearance (Extract 4). I asked Rose and Brenda respectively eight and nine appearance-related questions, yet only two of Brenda's responses displayed the 'trouble' features discussed above, compared to seven of Rose's responses. However, what was also notable is that whereas all those seven of my questions to Rose embedded a presumption that her appearance might be important to her, only three of my questions to Brenda embedded such a presumption. The sole trouble-free response *Rose* gave to one of my appearance-related questions was to the one in which I had *not* embedded in the question a prior assumption about the importance to her of her appearance.

What this suggests is that my own preconceptions shaped the precise way I formulated the appearance-related questions for each participant, positioning them as potentially more or less invested in their appearance. Furthermore, the signs of trouble participants displayed in response to these presumption-embedding questions of mine imply that being positioned as invested in their appearance is somehow problematic. In the concluding section I discuss what might be going on here and draw the strands together.

Discussion and conclusions

Much prior research has argued that as women age, other aspects of their lives, such as health, assume a higher priority than their appearance even though they continue to invest time in appearance practices (Baker and Gringart 2009, Hurd Clarke *et al.* 2008, Krekula 2007, Liechty 2012). In line with previous studies, my participants also on the whole clearly continued to invest time in their appearance; and even participants like Brenda, who had much looser routines and seemed to take less care with their apparel, devoted *some* time to managing their appearance, including the look of age. That is, in their practices – their care in attire, their hair-management practices – my participants displayed themselves in differing degrees as invested in their appearance.

Of course, my participants inevitably showed *some* interest in their appearance simply by virtue of the research site which enabled their selection. What is intriguing, though, is the apparent inconsistency between their *practices* and their more complex, dynamically-shifting *discursive* orientations. More specifically, in both the hair-salon and in interview participants produced discursive displays of *lack of interest* in their appearance at precisely the point where their investment in their appearance was made particularly salient. So in the hair-salon, when the showing of the mirror focussed attention on their hair

and invited approval and appreciation, Mrs Middleton (and others like her) constructed the main activity as being not hair-business but story-telling, whilst Brenda (and others like her) effectively claimed she had no interest whatsoever in what Ellie had done. Despite their presence in the hair-salon having their hair styled and their grey roots coloured – despite this apparent *investment* in their appearance – they displayed themselves as being ‘really’ *uninterested* in the outcome (notwithstanding any prior monitoring talk or discussion that, on the contrary, displayed interest). Similarly in interview, encountering questions about their hair-appointment practices and appearance routines that embedded presumptions that these might be important to them, participants again distanced themselves from the implications of these questions, or, as did Rose, constructed the importance as lying in something other than how they looked.

So how might we explain these discursive moves and these apparent inconsistencies? I suggest that at this point we need to locate participants’ discursive and non-discursive practices in the ‘larger/longer/slower social processes’ to which Rampton (2006: 24) refers.

As discussed earlier, in many Western cultures women are expected to attend to their appearance. For older women there are additional constraints and norms, as ‘Laxity over appearance in later life is culturally encoded, often taken

as an indicator of vulnerability and incapacity' (Ward *et al.* 2014: 69). If an older person looks unkempt and dishevelled they may be treated as not fully competent or in control (Dumas *et al.* 2005, Symonds and Holland 2008: 35); and this may be particularly the case for older *women*, given the expectations women face relating to their appearance. As discussed, my participants showed in interview and in salon-talk that they were aware of these norms.

However, at the same time, an interest in appearance in general – and particularly for women – may be deemed frivolous, trivial or even 'vain' as a number of authors observe (for example, Furman 1997: 3, Twigg 2007: 289). This casting of appearance as trivial extends even to its being disparaged as an appropriate subject for research (Furman 1997: 4). Such belittling was indeed expressed by one of my potential research participants as I recorded in an early fieldnote:

Extract 10

I met Jill by chance this morning. [...] She said she was happy to take part. [...] "But I don't agree with it." "Oh?" I said, "That's fine." [...] She continued, "I think it's trivial. It might be different if you were writing a book, but for a thesis I think it's trivial."

If investment in appearance is seen as trivial or vain, an interest in their appearance by *older* people may be deemed particularly vain, as 'The older we

become, the less acceptable it is to use appearance and self-presentation as a means of distinction and expression' (Ward and Holland 2011: 300). My participants showed they were aware of this societal norm, with some using the terms 'vain' and 'vanity' in interview in relation to their various appearance practices. Participants in other studies are also sometimes quoted as mentioning the possible vanity or triviality of their interest in appearance (e.g., Hurd Clarke 2002, Hurd Clarke and Griffin 2008: 664,668). So older women have to manage the tension between invisibility and appearing ridiculous; but at the same time, their work to avoid invisibility has to be achieved in a society that casts such a focus as trivial, vain or self-indulgent (Furman 1997: 67).

So what I suggest we see in the displays of lack of interest in the hair-salon approval sequences and in response to interview questions relating to hair and appearance is – at least in part – a subtle negotiation of the complexities of the conflicting norms of appearance for older women and work to construct appropriate older identities for themselves. Thus on the one hand, through their practices, my participants displayed themselves as respectable, competent, still-in-control and far from invisible older women who are managing the balancing act between not 'letting themselves go' and not being 'mutton dressed as lamb'. On the other hand they're also older women who, despite self-evidently investing this time and effort in their appearance, often displayed

themselves discursively as not *too invested*. These displays of lack of interest are shaped by the sequential context, namely, contexts in which their investment in their appearance is made particularly salient. Participants' negotiation of the conflicting social norms of appearance is low-key and nuanced; 'resistance' seems too big a word to describe what they are doing. Rather, potentially acting out of habit and less than fully consciously, these women seem to create in these different interactional settings 'a kind of 'wiggle room' (Erickson 2014 (2001): 169), or 'a little bit of space for innovation within what's otherwise experienced as the compelling weight of social expectation' (Rampton, Maybin and Roberts 2014: 11).

We should remember, of course, that my participants constituted a fairly a homogenous group in terms of gender, age, social, educational and ethnic background. In interview they displayed similar orientations to and awareness of the social norms of appearance discussed here. Participants from different backgrounds might well orientate to other social norms of appearance and employ other practices to negotiate their complexities. For example, Jacobs-Huey (2006) shows how Black hair is particularly politicized. But it's through focussing on these discursive practices at a micro-level that we see the very subtle and nuanced way in which older women – and other groups – negotiate

some of the tensions of managing their embodied self as they age, in mundane everyday settings.

This has methodological implications. On the one hand, qualitative interviews allow for considerable nuance and multiplicity of interpretation as many studies show (e.g., Dumas *et al.* 2005, Liechty 2012). However, as previously discussed, as many interactionally-focussed researchers have demonstrated (e.g., De Fina 2011, De Fina and Perrino 2011, Roulston 2014), and as I have shown here, an interview is a social encounter. Interviewees in a range of ways attend to that social setting and the possible identity categorizations made by the interviewer, for example, 'woman (unduly) invested in her appearance'. This means that the analysis should attend to the sequential context of particular claims, scrutinising not only the *interviewee's* but also the *interviewer's* utterances; and it should examine, too, the way those utterances are designed, with a view to gaining insight into the interactional project(s) underway.

On the other hand, observation does allow us insight into what people actually do. And in this study, it was the apparent inconsistency observed between participants' practices and much of their in-salon talk and their claims in interview that provided an entry point to analysis. But people's negotiation of norms, their moves of ideological accommodation or subversion, can be very

small and subtle. The fine detail of what they do may be lost in the notes made in the field – however full and contemporaneous those may be. Without audio-recording – or better (and a limitation of my study) video-recording – and the associated micro-analysis of at least some of the interactions, many of the small moves in which social norms are reproduced, subverted or contested – those small moments of low-scale ‘wobble-room’ – may simply not be noticed.

Appearance and its management is not a trivial issue. On the contrary, many studies – both those adopting an interactional orientation and others – have shown the consequentiality of people’s appearance in terms of their categorization and construction as particular *kinds* of people – whether Goths (Widdicombe 1998), nerd girls (Bucholtz 1999), or incoherent older person (Paoletti 1998). But this identity work can be complex, involving the negotiation of competing norms about what kinds of appearance practices construct particular kinds of people, including kinds of *older* people. Ward and Campbell (2013: 345) advocate ‘the creative mixing of methods’ when studying the role of appearance for people with dementia. I would go further and suggest that a multi-method approach, and one that includes examining interaction in micro-analytic detail, helps us better to see the complexity and apparent contradictoriness and heterogeneity of the meaning-making work older people more generally engage in via their appearance. We see, too, that whatever

older people might claim in interview, they may well in fact remain as affected as ever by social norms of appearance. Indeed, perhaps the real tension for older women (and older people generally) is how to continue to fashion desired identities for themselves via their mode of self-presentation, whilst more-or-less accommodating those different age-related norms.

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ⁱⁱⁱ *Transcription key (drawn from Jefferson (2004))*

(0.0) Pause in seconds/half seconds

(.) Micro pause

=	No break or gap
[]	Point of overlap onset/cessation
_____	Stress on underscored syllable
↓↑	Pitch step up/down in the following syllable
,	Phrase-final pitch rise
WORD	Utterance loud relative to surrounding talk
°word°	Utterance softer relative to surrounding talk
< >	Utterance slower than the surrounding talk
> <	Utterance faster than the surrounding talk
wo:rd	Syllable stretched out. More :: represents more stretching
.h	In-breath
fwordf	The word between the '£'/'£' uttered through a smile
wo(h)rd	'Plosiveness' in the word (in this paper, exclusively laughter)
(???)	Transcriber unable to determine what was said
(word)	Transcriber's best guess at unclear word/phrase
((word))	Transcriber's descriptions

